

Peter Berger

Subaltern Sovereigns: Rituals of Rule and Regeneration in Highland Odisha, India

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When Peter Berger began his PhD research among the Gadaba people of the Koraput Uplands in Odisha in 1999, he was struck by the proverbial wisdom of the Indigenous people of the area as expressed in the following saying: “*rājā dasarā, joriyā nandī, māli bāli, gāḍābā go’ter.*” This proverb, spoken in the Desia language, consists of four doublets, each one consisting of a social group followed by a ritual that defined the group. A preliminary descriptive translation of the saying might go as follows.

In the Koraput Uplands, the local royal family is renowned for the role they play in the annual Dasara ritual; the indigenous Joria people for their annual performance of the Nandi ritual; the Mali, a gardener community, for their Bali ritual, and the indigenous Gadaba for their *Go’ter* ritual, a life cycle ritual involving the sacrifice of buffaloes that honours the spirits of their dead. (1)

Having observed the *Go’ter* ritual of Gababa people firsthand, he reasoned that the proverb was an atomic conception of the values that informed the ritual thoughts and actions of a “sacrificial polity” in the Koraput Uplands. He resolved to explore its implications for understanding the cultural and historical geography of the region and for debates about tribes and castes in India more generally. The problem was, however, that while the Dasara ritual of the ruling Raja of the Koraput Uplands was obviously a local variation on the ancient and widespread annual ritual celebrated all over Hindu India, there was little in the ethnographic record about the specific form of the Dasara ritual found here. Furthermore, he could not find any reports on the Nandi ritual of the Joria or on the Bali ritual of the Mali. Berger wisely resolved to limit his PhD to a study of

the rituals of the Gadaba people and to postpone his analysis of the proverb as a topic for his postdoctoral research.

This book, *Subaltern Sovereigns: Ritual of Rule and Regeneration in Highland Odisha, India*, is the product of twenty-plus years of Berger's historical, comparative, and ethnographic postdoctoral research on the religious life of the Desia-speaking people of the Uplands. It puts the region on the cultural map and calls into question the received opinion about the values that inform religion and culture in twenty-first-century India.

Why, asks Berger, do "tribal" villagers in this area continue to observe the rituals of a kingdom whose official existence has long passed, a region where hydroelectricity developments and Maoist insurgencies flourish alongside the performance of these ancient rituals? Furthermore, he muses, isn't the very idea of "tribal kingdom" a contradiction in terms? Berger does not have all the answers to these questions, but, as the main title of his book suggests, he strives to grasp the paradoxes in the "native point of view." The religiosity of the Desia speakers of the Koraput Uplands is his prime concern. The book is also a study of the joys and sorrows of life as expressed in the ritual actions and thoughts of the Desia speakers of the Koraput Uplands in their sacred poetry, their singing, dancing, drinking, and feasting. But to live life to the full we all must die, and Berger's account of how the Desia speakers resolve this contradiction does not gloss over the fact that the gruesome ferocity of their sacrifice rituals, as well as their alleged practice of human sacrifice, have upset European sensibilities.

The Koraput Uplands is of theoretical importance for a study of the deep history of Indian sociology because it is here, the archaeologists tell us, that the three great movements of migrants into India meet: the Indo-Aryan speakers from the northwest, the Dravidian speakers from the southwest, and the Munda speakers from the northeast. A distinctive hybrid culture has emerged over the millennia. Desia, an Indo-Aryan language, is the lingua franca today, but the multilingual Gadaba, Joria, and others continue to speak their dialects of Munda and Dravidian languages. The distinctive culture of the region is founded not only on this deep history but also on the distinctive ecology of the region. The Koraput Uplands is part of the Dandakaranya (DNK) physiographic region of east-central India, the source, among others, of three important tributaries of the lower Godavari River Basin. A transect from west to east across the DNK begins at 200 meters on the Weinganga River in Maharashtra, rises rapidly to 800 meters up the Abujmarh Hills, falls to 600 meters across the Bastar Plateau, then rises to 900 meters across the Koraput Uplands, to descend sharply to the coast of Odisha. The three tributaries of the Godavari have their source in the Koraput Uplands where they exist as slow-flowing streams suitable for terraced rice cultivation using the transplantation method of farming. Farmers on the Bastar Plateau 300 meters below, and the lower plains more generally, by contrast, must rely on rainfed irrigation methods of production and the inefficient broadcast sowing method of production. In both areas millet is grown on the dry lands and hillside slopes.

Here, then, is the source of the many paradoxes the region presents. Outsiders regard it as an insignificant peripheral region, but for insiders, it lies at the center of Indian culture. This ethnocentric Desia conception is true in the geographic sense and not without merit in the deep historical sense. The region is the home of the most efficient rice farmers in India and, the archaeologists speculate, an independent origin of rice cultivation. However, it is also an economic backwater. Its chief exports today are hydroelectricity

and water from the many dams that capture the runoff; Maoist insurgents, for their part, have found the place attractive for their revolutionary activities.

For the Raja, Joria, Mali, Gadaba, and other communities in the Uplands, ritual activities remain extremely important. It could be argued that they have become more important and culturally involute over recent decades. The four rituals identified in the proverb, for example, can take anywhere from ten days to a couple of months. Staple food in the form of rice and millet are key symbols found in the rituals, the sacrifice of buffaloes and other animals are a key theme, and the singing of epic poetry often accompanies the performance of some of the rituals. Brahmin priests officiate at the king's rituals, but so do local non-Brahmin priests of many kinds. Female ritual specialists called *gurumāi* sing sacred poetry in the form of oral epics as well. The relationship between the ecology and sociology of the rituals is further complicated by the political history of the region. The king's palace, for example, moved from Nandapur in the Koraput Uplands to Jeypore on the Bastar Plateau; associated with this has been the movement of Desia speakers and their rituals onto the Bastar Plateau. This has produced seasonal and dramaturgical variation in the rituals. The Bali ritual, for example, is performed all over the DNK, but in strikingly diverse ways in separate places and in different seasons.

Berger documents this extraordinary complexity and strives to develop some general theses, but his prime concern is to "let the rituals speak for themselves" and to pose new questions for debate. The book is divided into two main parts. The first part, entitled "Kings, Subjects and Subaltern Sovereigns," sets the theoretical scene with an exhaustive review of the relevant literature. The second, "Proverbial Performances," presents the results of his own original ethnographic research in its comparative ethnographic and deep historical context. This analysis, as Berger is at pains to stress, owes much to the ethnographic research of his colleagues in Germany, France, the UK, India, and elsewhere who have done pioneering ethnographic research in the Koraput and neighboring regions in the early twenty-first century. Berger's contribution is to bring it together in the form of a masterful synthesis and interpretation of the ethnographic research. He develops a new theory of sacrifice that negotiates a path through that controversial terrain where many theories contend.

What constitutes sovereignty from the indigenous point of view, he asks. He argues that it is "the faculty of being sacrificers that establishes the senior status of the founders of a village, the earth people" (30). He finds the answer in their "ability to navigate the flow of life through sacrifices to the Earth Goddess in particular, . . . it is a sacrificial sovereignty, a sovereignty of life" (30). The king, for his part, is a sacrificial sovereign who performs at the global level what his subjects perform at the local level. For Berger, the power and status of the king relative to his subjects is an empirical question for investigation rather than a power relation whose meaning is assumed. Kings in India have been stripped of their political and economic functions over the years, but for those locals who continue to acknowledge and respect them, they retain their function as sacrificer, or rather that of co-sacrificer with the subalterns who assert their own sovereignty. Berger uses this idea in a creative rather than reductionist way to show how the complex, many-faceted rituals of the Uplands are open to various interpretations and perspectives. He is concerned to open debate, rather than to close it down. He does this by locating his own arguments in their historical and comparative context.

The second part of his book is a rich ethnographic analysis of the four doublets of the proverb. It is not simply a representation of the "native point of view" but a critique of

it. For example, the Joria are renowned for two rituals, not just one. Part 2, then, consists of five chapters, not four. The first chapter of part 2 (chapter 5) considers the Dasara ritual. This chapter identifies the specificity of the Dasara ritual in the Koraput Uplands kingdom by means of a series of comparisons: its performance in the capital versus its performance in the villages, and its performance in the neighboring tribal kingdom of Bastar versus its performance in Hindu kingdoms of Mysore and Puri.

The next two chapters (chapters 6–7) deal with the Ganga and Nandi festivals of the Joria. The names “Ganga” and “Nandi” evoke images of “Ma Ganga,” the Hindu River Goddess, and Shiva’s vehicle, Nandi the bull, but Berger found that these translations were false friends. The rituals are extremely complicated dramatic performances that defy simple summary. “Drama” is an apt metaphor in the case of the Ganga ritual, because the minute the invoked deities arrive in the village to “play” and “dance” around, a number of Joria “actors” assume the persona of three different social groups: the low-caste Dom, the Ghasi, and the high-caste Paik, the latter two of whom are rarely found in Joria or Gadaba villages. The three actor groups lead the worship of the Ganga deities as they parade around the village over the next ten days, a performance that includes a monkey dance and ends with a stilt dance. This ritual, held in January, is followed the next month by the Nandi ritual, a radically different six-day ritual that involves wall-paintings, women ritualists known as *gurumāis* who sing a long epic poem, and the worship of termite mounds and millet.

Chapter 8 deals with the Bali Jatra ritual of the Mali community. Like the festivals of the Joria, the Bali Jatra is concerned with regeneration and well-being in the general sense. Like in the Nandi ritual, the *gurumāi* plays a key role, but her epic tale is radically different. Millet is conspicuous for its absence as a key material symbol in the Bali Yatra. Its place is taken by wheat, a grain not grown in the Koraput Uplands. Another key performer is the god Bhima, well known all over Hindu India as one of the five Pandavas in the Mahabharata. However, once again Desia speakers conceive of this Hindu god in a unique way in the Koraput Uplands and over the broader DNK region more generally, where he is associated with the coming of rain. Bali means “sand,” so the fetching of sand from the riverbed and its return twelve days later defines the beginning and end of the final twelve days of the ritual. This final twelve-day sequence is, in turn, one part of a ritual that can last for up to two months in total. As in all the rituals, trance dances and sacrifices punctuate the performance.

Berger’s last substantive chapter (chapter 9) deals with the description, analysis, and interpretation of the Go’ter (“tearing”) ritual of the Gabada. Again, he introduces us to an extraordinarily long and complex ritual that is radically different from the others. Whereas the Dasara, Ganga, Nandi, and Bali rituals are annual cycle rituals that invoke great gods and goddesses, the Go’ter ritual is a life-cycle ritual centered on death and the spirits of the dead. Its concern is to transform the dead (*duma*) into ancestors (*anibai*). At these rituals, the ritual specialist invokes the *duma* spirits who assemble in the outward and visible form as a herd of water buffalo. The different buffaloes are identified with different recently deceased ancestors. Berger relates how his Gadaba interlocutor walked through the assembled herd introducing Berger to his deceased kin. The climax of the ritual is a bloody, gruesome event where the living set upon their *duma* in buffalo form and quite literally tear them apart as they struggle and fight for the tongue and entrails of the living beast as it slowly dies. The ritual attracts spectators from everywhere in their

thousands. In colonial times it attracted the attention of missionaries and colonizers, for whom the ritual was proof of the “savagery” of these “backward tribes.”

In his concluding chapter, “Navigating Life,” Berger offers his thoughts and speculations about the meaning of all these ritual actions. Three appendices provide a glossary of local terms, summary accounts of twenty-five key myths, and a translation of a Nandi song.

The rituals of the people of the Koraput Uplands are quite literally fantastic. Berger takes us on a journey into a world full of surprise and wonder. The book is nothing less than an invitation to think again about what it is that makes us human. What is truly “shocking” about this book is that it asks us to take seriously the idea of his informants that human sacrifice makes us human. It is an open secret in the Koraput Uplands, one transmitted by means of whispers, that human sacrifice persists to this day. Berger reports the whispers he heard and demonstrates, for example, that the Go’ter ritual “not only transforms the dead but also—by means of a ‘human sacrifice’—nurtures the living” (39).

The idea that a human being is the supreme gift that one can make to a god is an ancient and widespread one, so widespread in fact that it is hard to find examples where it did not exist. Berger is not concerned with the hoary question of whether human sacrifices “really happen” but with the fact of the continued existence of this ancient and widespread practice as a valued idea. What does this fact of value tell us about ourselves? How does the ethnographer write about “whispers” of its continued existence in the Koraput Uplands in a way that conveys honor and respect on the ethnographic subject rather than seeing it as evidence of “barbarism” and “savagery”? Why have outsider members of the political elite been ever-keen to label beliefs of this kind as “savage” and “barbaric” when only a slight acquaintance with the deep history of religion is needed to realize that values of this kind are among the defining characteristics of *homo sapiens*? Such are some of the questions that occur to me as I read this fascinating, ethnographically rich tome. It is a true treasure house of proverbial wisdom.

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